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ABSTRACT

This case study documents how the school board of the city of New Rochelle, New York, handled change when it transmuted from being appointed to being elected. Local policy implications undergird such a transition. Specifically, a review of political influences and outcomes on school board policy and how the board and the city's politicians coped with various issues before, during, and after the transition process comprise the crux of this study. (JAM)

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CASE STUDY IN CHANGE: APPOINTED TO ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD

by

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CASE STUDY IN CHANGE: APPOINTED TO ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD

School boards have an awesome responsibility in setting policies. The budgets they manage are often greater than their communities' budgets. They must constantly cope with change. Yet there is very little research on the two types of school boards, elected and appointed, or their decision making processes. An article in Educational Administration Quarterly (Mitchell, 1984) echoes previous sentiments, "Disappointingly,the vast literature on the topic of educational policy has produced no standard textbooks, little agreement on the methods or goals of educational policy research and few 'classic' or exemplary studies for defining the area's central thrust or overall theoretical perspectives." Further justification for the case study method to illuminate the political process is the paucity of knowledge on politics of education (Drachler, 1977; Cistone, 1977). This case study can shed light on one aspect of local policy making through a historical view of the change that took place from an appointed to an elected board of education.

Background

It was undoubtedly, "acute displeasure with the current board" (Grossman, 1982) of education that created the conditions which led the City of New Rochelle to a referendum to change from an appointed to an elected school board in November 1982. While there had long been an undercurrent of opinion that, perhaps, an elected school board was needed, there were some salient events which marked the process of change. The City had voted negatively on this same question in 1950. In the early 1960's during a campaign for council and mayor, issues emerged on school board operation and policy. Since the mayor who appointed the school board was a Democrat, the Republicans seized the initiative. The new Republican Mayor, Alvin Ruskin, later set

up a screening committee to select board members and the new Republican Councilman, Joseph Pisani, who later became a New York State Senator, attempted to pass a resolution on City Council to request a referendum on the elected school board. After that, the issue continued to bob in and out of public attention.

The League of Women Voters made a two year study and reached a consensus in 1969 and in 1970 which stated, "whether an elected or appointed board exists, the crucial factor is the use of a nominating committee in the selection of school board members" (Phillips, 1982). This coincided with the first irregular use of the previously established screening committee, first by Democratic Mayor Stanley Church and then by Mayor Frank Garito. Republican Mayor Garito re-convened the screening committee in 1974 (Grossman, 1981) and it was continued up until 1981 when Republican Mayor Leonard Paduano disbanded it again (Grossman, 1982). In 1977 charges had been made that the screening committee had no south end residents. Democratic Mayor Vincent Rippa had threatened to disband the committee , but decided instead to add south end residents to the committee.

In the 1970's the issue of the school board continued to surface, with Republicans being more vocal on the need for a school board referendum. In 1972 after the City Council voted to petition the state for this referendum, a newspaper article (The Standard-Star, 1972) noted that in the past few years in the State Assembly where former Councilman Joseph Pisani was now a member, the referendum bill had passed, but was subsequently killed in the Senate.

In 1978, Dr. Francis Judge, a former school board member, debated the

need for an elected school board with Alvin Gitlitz, a former administrator in the New Rochelle public schools. It was no surprise in March 1980 after Dr. Judge was elected to City Council (by Republican-Conservative endorsement) to see him ask for a school board referendum (Walsh, 1980). His council resolution was passed (Senter, 1980). However, the New Rochelle school board refused to support the resolution. Council members, even the two originally opposed to the resolution, supported the submission of the bill to the state legislature. The bill sponsored by the now Senator Joseph Pisani received unanimous support (54-0) in the Republican controlled Senate. However, the bill's fate in the Democratic controlled Assembly was predictable. The Assembly's education chair, Democratic Leonard Stavisky, felt that state law provided for a referendum called by the school board and that this should not be by-passed with state legislation through a request from the City Council (Sullivan, 1981). However, the bill finally did pass in July 1981 and Governor Carey signed the bill for a referendum in 1982.

The rest was expected. Debates, endorsements, and newspaper editorials followed. Among these was a jointly sponsored Charter League and Citizen's Council debate. While there was agreement in the audience on the need for a screening panel, the complaints about the present school board ranged from unresponsiveness to lack of concern for education. There was support for the present appointed board because it was felt it would better represent the very diverse community of New Rochelle. A charge was made that the present board of education was "elitist" and not, for example, represented by small businessmen (Grossman, 1982). Elected school boards were supported as more democratic.

A later forum (Fiordalisi, 1982) sponsored by the College of New Rochelle and Iona College focused on the discontent with the present board's responsiveness, and the politics of both elected and appointed boards. A brochure printed by Iona College and the College of New Rochelle listed the major advantages of an appointed board as highly qualified members selected from the entire community, while elected boards as able to be held accountable at election time. The election process also allows citizens to learn candidate's positions on issues.

The voters settled the question in November 1982 by a two to one majority in favor of the elected board of education. This vote was a complete turn-around from the vote of November 7, 1950 when 8,156 to 5,362 favored keeping an appointive method of school board selection. In 1950 this referendum was necessary because New York State had passed a law which granted fiscal independence to city school boards and allowed school board elections. A city such as New Rochelle with an appointed board was given the right to continue the appointed board only through approval by a referendum.

History of New Rochelle School Board

New Rochelle organized three schools in 1796 under the first New York State public school law enacted with a five year provision from 1795-1800. A five man school commission was elected in 1796. After this, voluntary citizen groups ran the schools until 1812 when New York State law provided for school districts administered by three trustees, a tax collector and a clerk elected at an annual town meeting to serve at least one year. Three school commissioners were selected six months later by the electors of New Rochelle to serve until the town meeting in April 1813

when all the school officials were elected.

The state legislature created union free school districts in 1853. By 1857 a law made New Rochelle District 1 a union free school district and the first nine member board of education was elected at the annual school meeting of April 6, 1857. However, the law was a difficult one for principals because the board had many powers which infringed on their authority. By 1870 the superintendency was established.

When the city charter was drawn up in 1899 allowing the Mayor with the approval of the Board of Aldermen to appoint Board members, an amendment was substituted enabling appointments of Board members for three years to be made without approval of the Aldermen. In 1917 terms of Board members were lengthened to five years.

The New York State Department of Education surveyed the New Rochelle schools in 1935 and advocated that the Board be elected so that citizens would have more input on educational policy.

In 1944 the PTA Council of New Rochelle also favored an elected board of education. A few years later the previously mentioned provision for a referendum was passed by the New York State Legislature along with a law granting fiscal independence to city boards of education. Consequently, the referendum of 1950 was held to continue the appointive process in New Rochelle. This method remained (Devane, 1954) until 1982 when the elected school board became a reality.

Elected and Appointed School Boards

Research comparing elected and appointed school boards is scarce. Early research studied the personal characteristics of board members. Counts (1927) found board members elected by wards were youngest, while

the oldest ones were elected at large or appointed by a mayor or council. "Proprietors" and "professionals" were more likely to be appointed, while clerical workers and manual laborers were more often elected.

Later (Stumpf & Miller, 1952) found more similarities than differences in elected and appointed school board members, but by occupation they found elected school board members were more qualified. Appointed school board members tended to be "joiners" of clubs, while elected school board members had greater chances of becoming leaders in the community.

These differences from 1927 to 1952 may have reflected what was happening in American society. However, by 1980 the increasingly politicized environment of schools was noted by Mosher (1980), Tucker and Zeigler (1980), and the American School Board Journal (1980).

Cronin (1973) made a historical review of 14 urban school boards. He felt since elected school boards relied on public support, they would be more aware of the political role of the superintendent. He found between 1900 and 1970 elected boards tended to select "insiders" or survivers, rather than "outsiders", who might be more innovative. Elected school boards selected an "insider" 66% of the time, while appointed school boards selected one 50% of the time.

The appointed school board member has been viewed as a gentleman in office (Kirst, 1970). But by 1977 Drachler(in Scribner, ed.) made the observation that board members were no longer appointed as a reward for distinction, but to represent different segments of the population. Complicating this is the unmistakeable trend of school environments to become increasingly politicized. This may be caused by "redistributive politics" which has raised the level of conflict in policy making (Boyd, 1983).

Since there is only a small volume of research on school government, the insights from the few studies of elected and appointed school boards may shed light on how they function in the public interest. Hodges (1966) found no significant differences between elected and appointed school board members on role definition items. Godfrey (1984), by contrast, found superintendents of elected and appointed school boards differed significantly in the areas of their perception of control in the policy making areas of pupil personnel and public relations. Superintendents of appointed school boards felt they had more control over these functions than did superintendents of elected school boards. Elected and appointed school board members differed significantly in the policy making area of public relations. Elected school board members felt they had considerably more control in this area.

The majority of school boards are elected in the United States.Yet the merits of the elected system have been open to question. Board members may represent the higher income or more affluent neighborhoods of the city and may not be balanced ethnically or racially. These were some of the common charges during the referendum campaign. The more frequent charge, that elected school boards are more political, was apparently not a major concern of the voters.

Inferences for Policy Making

The differences in policy making that emerge for elected and appointed school boards are not numerous, but they may be important. Elected school board members felt a greater perception of control in the public relations areas of school district newsletters, budget information, and creating

parent advisory groups, while their superintendents felt they had less control. However, in the pupil personnel area, superintendents of appointed boards felt they had more control than school board members attributed to them (Godfrey, 1984). This could be a signal that in important areas of students' rights, suspensions, corporal punishment and eligibility for interscholastic sports that either the district types, elected or appointed, differ in a significant way or that the potential for conflict is greater when school boards are appointed. There are a few hints of this in the literature. Nystrand and Cunningham (1974) place most appointed school boards in the South and they note that Northern school boards that are appointed tend to be more liberal in race issues and less likely to pay attention to citizens. In Arlington, Virginia, when the elected school board tried to comply with desegregation decisions handed down by the courts, the State legislature abolished elected school boards (Marshall, 1982).

New Rochelle, by contrast, had gone through a series of problems with desegregation. The appointed school board had run the gamut by first gerrymandering school district lines to prevent desegregation, and later championing desegregation. At the time of the referendum, one of the arguments against the elected school board was that it would not represent all segments of the community. It is possible to conjecture that appointed school board members can be selected because they favor a specific viewpoint and will be less likely to look at problems from a unified community perspective. Elected school board members may form alliances during a campaign for office but their outlook must be broadened by citizen

input and pressure groups.

If Peters and Austin (1985) are right in their assertion that people are the important ingredient in an organization's leadership, then the people who are elected or appointed to school boards are as important as the method of selection used.

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